

Strong Leaders in Small Town, Rural America

Research Thesis

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Table of Contents

| | |
|------------------------------|----|
| Intro | 1 |
| Theoretical | 6 |
| Plan of the Paper | 12 |
| Methodology..... | 13 |
| Findings | 20 |
| Conclusion | 29 |
| Participant Index | 31 |
| Endnotes and Citations | 32 |

Intro

The 2016 American presidential election was one of the most eventful and surprising races in modern politics. On the Democrats' side, former First Lady and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was nominated after becoming the first female presidential candidate standing for a major party.¹ On the Republican's side, former real estate investor and television show host Donald Trump was nominated beating out several other seasoned politicians including the likes of: Jeb Bush, Ted Cruz, and Marco Rubio.² Both candidates had controversial issues hanging over their heads (Hillary being scrutinized for misuse of a private email server for classified materials and Trump being criticized for his general attitude towards women) but both surged forward waging strong campaigns against the other.³ ⁴ Media outlets took full advantage of the election with many of the bigger sites taking sides (i.e. CNN for Hillary and Fox for Trump), further highlighting for public consumption the faults in both candidates. Even Russia played a role in the election as allegations were brought against the Russian government for leaking emails from key Democratic officials and attempting to influence American voters through social media by discrediting Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party.⁵

As the presidential race got down to the last few weeks, the media became increasingly confident that Hillary Clinton would win the presidency. Many public opinion polls had her

¹ Healy, Patrick, and Jonathan Martin. "Democrats Make Hillary Clinton a Historic Nominee." The New York Times. July 26, 2016. Accessed April 01, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/27/us/politics/dnc-speakers-sanders-clinton.html>.

² Collinson, Stephen, and Tal Kopan. "It's Official: Trump Is Republican Nominee." CNN. July 20, 2016. Accessed April 01, 2019. <https://www.cnn.com/2016/07/19/politics/donald-trump-republican-nomination-2016-election/index.html>.

³ Johnson, Carrie. "Government Inquiry Into Clinton Emails Likely To Widen." NPR. August 19, 2015. Accessed April 01, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2015/08/19/432908987/government-inquiry-into-clinton-emails-likely-to-widen>.

⁴ Lemire, Jonathan. "Explicit Audio Emerges of Trump Sexually Objectifying Women." PBS. October 07, 2016. Accessed April 01, 2019. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/trump-video-women>.

⁵ Diamond, Jeremy. "Russian Hacking and 2016 Election, Explained." CNN. December 16, 2016. Accessed April 01, 2019. <https://www.cnn.com/2016/12/12/politics/russian-hack-donald-trump-2016-election/index.html>.

winning by a comfortable margin, despite a late upsurge in support for Trump.⁶ Talk shows such as *The Daily Show* began discussing what it would be like to have a woman as U.S. President and the political satire *South Park* designed the season's plot around her being elected U.S. President.^{7 8} Going into Election Day, many Americans and news outlets had already accepted that Hillary would win and many Trump supporter believed that defeat was inevitable. And then it happened. On Tuesday November 8th, 2016, Donald J. Trump won the presidential election becoming the 45th president of the United States of America.⁹ Moreover, despite the early polls and widespread animosity towards him and his campaign, Trump won by a landslide electoral vote (306-232) even though he lost the popular vote.¹⁰

This left many people in not only America, but the world wondering: Why? Why Trump? Why did America choose Donald Trump to be its president, despite his lack of political experience and all of the negativity towards him, his actions, and his platform? This is the core question, the puzzle if you will, that this paper is going to try and answer. To provide a plausible explanation as to why this happened.

First and foremost, it is imperative to understand which group of people made the real difference in the election, and that was rural Americans. According to exit polls from *National Public Radio*, the Republican presidential vote in rural areas was substantially higher in the 2016 election as compared to the two previous contests, and the Democratic vote went down in urban

⁶ Mercer, Andrew, Claudia Deane, Kiley McGeeney, Andrew Mercer, Claudia Deane, and Kiley McGeeney. "Why 2016 Election Polls Missed Their Mark." Pew Research Center. November 09, 2016. Accessed April 01, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/why-2016-election-polls-missed-their-mark/>.

⁷ "The Final Days of the 2016 Election." In *The Daily Show*. Comedy Central. November 7, 2016.

⁸ Parker, Trey, and Matt Stone, writers. "Fort Collins." In *South Park*. Comedy Central. October 25, 2016.

⁹ "Donald Trump Has Been Elected the 45th President of the United States." NBCNews.com. November 8, 2016. Accessed April 01, 2019. <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/2016-election-day/2016-election-donald-trump-wins-white-house-upset-n679936>.

¹⁰ Zurcher, Anthony. "US Election 2016 Results." BBC News. Accessed April 01, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/election/us2016/results>.

areas over the same period of time.¹¹ Between the 2008 and 2016 elections, Democratic votes fell by 4% in urban areas as opposed to the 1% shift towards Republicans in the same areas.¹¹ In suburban areas, the Republican vote essentially stayed the same and the Democratic one dropped 5% but most of those votes went to third party candidates.¹¹ But in rural areas, the Democratic vote fell 11% from 2008 to 2016 whereas the Republican vote grew by 9% in those same areas.¹¹ So as can be seen, the rural vote was a substantial factor in shaping the election outcome and is therefore the focus of this thesis.

But even with the establishment of the importance of rural America, there is still the question of: Why Trump? Why did these rural areas so overwhelmingly prefer Trump? And herein lies the hypothesis of this paper: Rural, small town Americans voted for Donald Trump because of not only their predisposition towards a conservative candidate, but because of the added factor of Trump's strong leadership style projected through his political ideology, which is a largely unexplored dimension of his appeal.

So what does this hypothesis mean? The essential argument is that many rural Americans saw and heard what Donald Trump said and did and they believed that he was a strong leader who really would deliver on his campaign promise and make America great again. For each person that voted for Trump, there was likely a policy point of his that they liked such as: border security, coal, bringing back jobs, removing corrupt politicians, and so forth. Nonetheless, each of these elements tie back to one thing: Trump's leadership style and his willingness to break with convention and tradition to achieve his goals. Every person who voted for him did so

¹¹ Kurtzleben, Danielle. "Rural Voters Played A Big Part In Helping Trump Defeat Clinton." NPR. November 14, 2016. Accessed April 01, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2016/11/14/501737150/rural-voters-played-a-big-part-in-helping-trump-defeat-clinton>.

because they believed in not only what he promised, but also that he could deliver on his promises.

In a lot of ways however, Trump's leadership is different than that of recent American Presidents. He tends to lead using his strong, charismatic personality to win people over and place himself in the forefront of the issues. He also tends to lead with simple-minded determination to use his position to do what he claims to be best for the population, like building a wall along the Mexican border to try and stop illegal immigration and drug smuggling. He is always at pains to display strong leadership to convince supporters and his like enemies that he is in charge as president and is more than capable of achieving what he wants. And interestingly enough, this style of leadership is similar to that of President Putin of Russia. President Putin has a very charismatic personality and uses his authority to put himself at the center of issues and to show his supporters and enemies that he is a strong leader. Both basically ran for president on the same platform, "Make (America/Russia) Great Again" as both saw their respective countries as weak when they took over and had long term plans to strengthen them by overcoming opposition by any means.

As a result, to provide preliminary support for the hypothesis of this paper that rural Americans voted for Trump because of his strong leadership, this paper will examine small town Americans' perceptions of President Putin's leadership instead of President Trump's. In theory, small town Americans should despise President Putin because they are predominately Republican and very patriotic, and should therefore despise America's traditionally worst enemy Russia. This is a result of anti-communist sentiments, and therefore anti-Russia because they were the driving force behind communist expansion after World War II, that should result in small town Americans despising President Putin of Russia. President Putin is also essentially the

more extreme, authoritarian version of Trump and so if small town Americans agree with and/or admire the things that Putin has done, it will only further validate the point that rural Americans have a genuine, abiding preference for strong leadership. Evidence of popular perceptions for Trump's leadership style is also not available, to the best of my knowledge, so this method of examining President Putin's leadership style was chosen to get at the source of rural public support for strong political leadership. This will set the stage for subsequent research on perception of Trump's leadership style and its impact on the vote of small town, rural Republicans.

Theoretical

Before any analysis of this puzzle can begin, it is first important to understand some key concepts, which will explain why the puzzle is relevant in American society. This section will: establish the qualifications of a strong leader and show how Vladimir Putin fits those qualifications, explain the historical differences in leadership styles between the United States and Russia, and explore American public opinion towards President Putin of Russia as an initial means of understanding Trump's extraordinary electoral success in rural America. These key concepts will establish the complexity of strong leadership in modern society, as well as establish the connection in leadership style between President Trump and President Putin.

To begin with, the first key concept is what exactly a "strong leader" is and how President Putin qualifies as one. For the purposes of this paper, for someone to qualify as a "strong leader" they must first and foremost be the designated leader of a country. They are not just somebody who is influential or well regarded but they are individuals who became the leader of that country through public support. The second qualification is that the strong leader must make full use of the powers they have to achieve at least some of their political goals. This can be accomplished through methods like executive orders (US) or Decrees of the President of Russia, but they must use their power in some way to achieve their goals.

With an understanding of this paper's definition of a strong leader, it is equally important to explain why Vladimir Putin qualifies as such a leader. First, President Putin has been elected to be the President through popular vote in Russia four different times.¹² Second, Putin has

¹² "Russia Election: Vladimir Putin Wins by Big Margin." BBC News. March 19, 2018. Accessed April 01, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43452449>.

exercised his power through methods such as Decrees of the President of Russia, to avoid domestic opposition to his actions, which have the same power as a law. An example of this was in May of 2018, President Putin signed one to restructure the ministries of education in Russian, which put the Federal Agency of Youth Issues under direct control of the government.¹³ This allowed for more oversight of youth to prevent them from attending anti-government rallies.¹³ As a result, President Putin does qualify for the title of strong leader.

The second key concept to understand for this paper is the historical difference between styles of presidential leadership of the US (United States) and Russia. First looking at the US, the country started off as a monarchy (a system of government ruled by a king or queen) under British colonial rule.¹⁴ Over time the colonies developed a distaste for this style of government because they had no control over the actions of the British monarchs in London.¹⁴ This eventually led to the Revolutionary War where the colonies defeated the British and declared independence for the United States of America.¹⁴ After their victory, the 13 constituent states established a weak central government under the Articles of Confederation, because their experience of British rule made them distrustful of a strong, centralized leader, but this did not work because there was nobody to lead the country in time of emergency or conflict.¹⁵ As a result, the newly founded country decided to dissolve this government and established a new one under the constitution of the United States, which established a strong, but still constricted, office of the President.¹⁶

¹³ Rfe/rl. "President Signs Decree To Restructure Russian Government." RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty. May 16, 2018. Accessed April 01, 2019. <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-president-signs-decree-to-restructure-government/29229636.html>.

¹⁴ Wallace, Willard M. "American Revolution." Encyclopedia Britannica. January 14, 2019. Accessed April 01, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/event/American-Revolution>.

¹⁵ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopedia. "Articles of Confederation." Encyclopedia Britannica. January 29, 2019. Accessed April 01, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Articles-of-Confederation>.

¹⁶ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopedia. "Constitution of the United States of America." Encyclopedia Britannica. January 29, 2019. Accessed April 01, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Constitution-of-the-United-States-of-America>.

Since this Constitution was enacted the United States has essentially only seen one style of leader for their country. This style of leadership, largely based on the first American President George Washington, includes aspects like adhering to the wishes of the people, and working within the checks and balances set up by the constitution.^{17 18} While times have changed and each president has brought something different to the table, in terms of policy and goals, this style of presidential leadership has not really changed. Every four years the country gets together on the first Tuesday in November and votes on whom they want to run their country. Each elected president is now limited to serve two terms (8 total years) in office and then he has to step down.¹⁹ Each President has had checks and balances to keep them from becoming too powerful, such as Congress and the Supreme Court, and has to work with them and the public to accomplish their goals. Each President generally abides by the wishes of the public on key issues so as to maintain support. This is the style and structure of leadership that the United States has known for its entire existence and whose boundaries President Trump is often accused of testing.

This style of leadership is somewhat similar to Russia's current government, in that both countries have a single leader and other governmental entities that they must work with, but drastically different from Russia's historical leadership. Historically speaking, Russia has had a long string of authoritarian leaders who have shaped the country's understanding and expectation of leadership. During the mid-1200's, the early Russian people were ruled by the Mongolian Empire in a society where the Mongols controlled many aspects of life including land ownership

¹⁷ "Presidential Precedents." George Washington's Mount Vernon. Accessed April 01, 2019. <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/presidential-precedents/>.

¹⁸ Neustadt, Richard E. Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership. New York: Wiley, 1980

¹⁹ "The 22nd Amendment of the U.S. Constitution." National Constitution Center – The 22nd Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Accessed April 01, 2019. <https://constitutioncenter.org/interactive-constitution/amendments/amendment-xxii>.

and personal rights.²⁰ Similarly, in the mid-1500's, Russia was ruled by Ivan the Terrible, who did create a governmental structure to run the country but designed it to centralize power under him.²¹ His rule was peaceful at first but turned violent later as mass executions began, after successive military failures in war; eventually leading Ivan to go as far as to destroy the city of Novgorod and executing several thousand of its inhabitants.²¹ And right before the Russian Revolution of 1917, Tsar Nicholas the II ruled Russia under the belief that God desired him to maintain absolute power, even if the Russia people suffered from lack of food and large numbers of them died in the Great War.²² He was eventually removed from power as the Bolshevik revolutionaries established a new political order called the Union of Socialist Soviets Republics.²³

This new order was meant to liberate and empower ordinary Russians, but it continued to produce authoritarian leaders. The first Soviet leader, Vladimir Lenin, clamped down on any form of dissent within his ruling Communist Party and attempted to destroy political opposition through actions like frequent use of the death penalty.²⁴ And after him came Joseph Stalin, arguably the most authoritarian leader Russia has ever had. He centralized power in his person and controlled every aspects of Russian society through actions like sending dissenters to secret

²⁰ Steeves, Paul. "Russia in Bondage." MONGOL IMPACT. Accessed April 01, 2019. <https://www2.stetson.edu/~psteeves/classes/mongolimpact.html>.

²¹ Andreyev, Nikolay. "Ivan the Terrible." Encyclopædia Britannica. March 14, 2019. Accessed April 01, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ivan-the-Terrible>.

²² Keep, John L.H. "Nicholas II." Encyclopædia Britannica. January 28, 2019. Accessed April 01, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nicholas-II-tsar-of-Russia>.

²³ Conquest, Robert, John C. Dewdney, Richard E. Pipes, and Martin McCauley. "Soviet Union." Encyclopædia Britannica. December 20, 2018. Accessed April 01, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Soviet-Union>.

²⁴ Resis, Albert. "Vladimir Lenin." Encyclopædia Britannica. March 18, 2019. Accessed April 01, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vladimir-Lenin>.

prisons and censoring practically everything the media published.^{25 26} Time and time again, Russia has experienced these forceful, authoritarian leaders who centralize power around themselves and act unilaterally after overriding popular opposition, exactly the opposite to the leadership style traditionally experienced in the United States.

And the third key concept to understand is modern American, specifically Republican, attitudes towards President Putin and Russia. In theory, Republicans should oppose and distrust President Putin, and Russia as a whole, because of their long-standing anti-communist bias.²⁷ This rejection of the USSR should carry over to the modern day because Russia was the driving force of the Soviet Union, which was communist.²⁷ But interestingly enough, recent public opinion polls have been showing a noticeable upsurge in Republicans' approval for Russia and President Putin. According to a Poll released by the Pew Research Center in July of 2018, only 38% of Republicans stated that they believed Russia's 'power and influence' are a major threat to the well-being of the US.²⁸ This number is down from 58% in 2014; even 63% of Democrats stated in 2017 that they believe Russian 'power and influence' was a threat.²⁸ And according to another poll by Gallup, 40% of Republicans in 2018 stated that they believed Russia was either friendly or an ally to the US, up from 22% in 2014.²⁹ While these numbers are not a majority, they are certainly significant.

²⁵ Editors, History.com. "Great Purge." History.com. March 15, 2018. Accessed April 01, 2019.

<https://www.history.com/topics/russia/great-purge>.

²⁶ "History of Russian Journalism." Journalism Under Fire History - Miami University. Accessed April 01, 2019.

<https://miamioh.edu/cas/academics/centers/havighurst/cultural-academic-resources/havighurst-special-programing/journalism-under-fire/journalism-history/index.html>

²⁷ Lyons, John F. "Cold War and Anti-Communism." Encyclopedia of Chicago. Accessed March 31, 2019.

<http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/310.html>

²⁸ Bialik, Kristen. "Putin Remains Overwhelmingly Unpopular in U.S." Pew Research Center, Pew Research Center, 26 Mar. 2018, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/03/26/putin-remains-overwhelmingly-unpopular-in-the-united-states/

²⁹ Gallup, Inc. "Republicans More Positive on U.S. Relations With Russia." Gallup.com, 13 July 2018, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/237137/republicans-positive-relations-russia.aspx>

So, if this is true that Republicans/Conservatives are starting to view President Putin and Russia more favorably, then the question is why? Why do Republicans/Conservatives feel this way? And how is this related to the election of Donald Trump? This is where everything ties back to this paper's hypothesis: rural, small town, rural Americans voted for Donald Trump because of not only their predisposition towards a conservative candidate, but also their attraction to strong leadership compounded by the attraction of his conservative ideology. Naturally, one would expect conservative, rural Americans to condemn President Putin, if nothing else because he is the leader of America's arch rival. There should simply be no support for him, his actions, or his achievements, unless Americans are attracted to strong leadership no matter who practices it. And if this is true that conservative, small town America does admire this strong leadership style of President Putin, it means that Trump was able to successfully take advantage of a pre-existing, and largely unexplored preference in rural American public opinion to win the 2016 election.

This paper is the first, modest exploration of this possible explanation for Trump's unprecedented popularity in rural America in the 2016 election. It will examine if Americans, specifically small town Americans that are overwhelmingly Republican/Conservative, are starting to view President Putin's Style of leadership as preferable to traditional American presidential leadership style, and what that could mean long term.

Plan of the Paper

The next section of this paper will cover the methodology of the project. The section will explain how and why the location of the project was chosen, as well as why an interview method was chosen to collect data and how they were conducted. After the methodology will be the findings section where the results of the interviews will be explained. This section identifies and explains the three most common and important patterns amongst the interviewees' responses to the questions about strong leadership. Finally, the paper will end with a conclusion where the three patterns from the findings will be tied back in to the rest of the paper to assess rural Americans' perceptions of strong leadership. The conclusion will also explain how their perceptions may have played a role in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and how it could play a role in the 2020 election.

Methodology

To investigate this question and thesis, a location and method for collecting and analyzing the data had to be chosen. As a result, the town of New Philadelphia, Ohio in Tuscarawas County was chosen as the area because of its location in rural Ohio and its strongly Republican background. Additionally, doing interviews using a semi-structured interview method was chosen to question people from New Philadelphia, so as to capture the complexity of their thoughts and evaluations of Putin's strong leadership style as President of Russia.

New Philadelphia, Ohio is a small rural Ohio town located in Tuscarawas County in the East-Central part of the state. The town was founded in 1804 and sits along the Ohio-Erie Canal making it a "focal point for travelers and settlers from the east."³⁰ As its name suggests, the town is modeled after the famous historical city of Philadelphia with similar features in its layout, streets, and buildings.³¹ The town is laid out in a similar style grid to Philadelphia, along with the post office being modeled on Independence Hall and its two main streets, High Avenue and Broadway, bearing the names of original streets in Philadelphia.³¹

In the present day, New Philadelphia has a population of 17,000 people and is the county seat, with the courthouse being located in central downtown.³¹ Inside of the town are all the things one would expect: schools, a football stadium, a park, churches, stores, bars, and so forth. And immediately outside of town: farms, rolling countryside, backroads, more churches, and

³⁰ "History." History of New Philadelphia, Ohio. Accessed March 31, 2019. <http://www.newphilaoh.com/History-of-New-Phila>.

³¹ "About New Philadelphia." Visitors to New Philadelphia Ohio | About Our City. Accessed March 31, 2019. <http://www.newphilaoh.com/About-New-Philadelphia>.

even a large Amish community that is not based in New Philadelphia, but frequents it regularly. By all measures, New Philadelphia is a typical small, rural American town.

While New Philadelphia has characteristics of small, rural towns across America, it is also a Republican stronghold, which is amply evident from its voting record over the past 18 years.³² In the most recent presidential election (2016), Republican candidate Donald Trump won about 65% of the vote in Tuscarawas County as compared to only 30% for Democrat candidate Hillary Clinton.³³ In 2012, Republican president candidate Mitt Romney won only 53.5% of the vote as compared to 44% for Obama.³³ And this pattern can also be seen in 2000 and 2004 as the Republican candidate, George Bush Jr., had the most votes with 53% in 2000 and 54.5% in 2004.³³ Since 2000, there has been only one election (2008) in which the presidential candidate who won the county was not a Republican and in that year, the Democratic candidate won only 49% of the total votes.³³ It is immediately evident that Donald Trump was especially popular in Tuscarawas County, winning over 10% more of the popular vote than his immediate Republican predecessors George Bush and Mitt Romney.

This area's Republican credentials are also not restricted to just the presidential races. In 6 of the 7 US Senate elections since 2000, the Republican candidate won in Tuscarawas County, beating out the Democratic candidate by an average of 21.43% of the vote.³³ In 4 of the 5 Governor elections, the Republican candidate won by an average of 17.89%.³³ And in 11 of the 14 U.S. House elections since 2000, the Republican candidate has won by an average of 26.39%

³² Voting results are based on Tuscarawas County because results for specifically New Philadelphia were not available, but there is no reason to believe they would be drastically different than the rest of the County.

³³ Tuscarawas County Board of Elections. Accessed March 31, 2019. <https://tuscarawas.ohiohoe.com/election-info/election-night-results/>.

in years they did not run unopposed.^{33 34 35} Additionally, New Philadelphia itself currently has a Republican mayor who was elected to the position in 2016.³³ As can be seen, Tuscarawas County, and its main town and county seat New Philadelphia, is a Republican stronghold.

This makes the town an ideal candidate for this project because in theory, it should show very little support, if any, for any from Russian, let alone for that country's leading figure, its president. Historically Republicans have been strongly anti-communist during, and after the Cold War, and would therefore be thought to be anti-Russian if only because of its long association with communism.³⁶ So in theory, because Putin is Russian there should be little support for him or his actions amongst the population of New Philadelphia. Therefore if New Philadelphians are indeed attracted to Putin's style of strong leadership it suggests a predilection that likely played a strong role in Trump's resounding 2016 election success in Tuscarawas County.

Now in addition to selecting a location to examine, a method of data collection also had to be chosen for the project. The basic choice was between a standard local survey and a semi-structured interview and the latter was chosen because: 1) lack of financial and human resources to conduct a standard survey and 2) semi-structured interviews allows respondents to articulate their opinions and share their thoughts on the interview questions, where a standard survey does not.³⁷ Therefore this data collection method was chosen to discover the subtleties and complexities regarding what about this leadership style attracted them to it.

³⁴ A Republican candidate for Congress ran unopposed in 2002 and 2014.

³⁵ Tuscarawas County was split between the 6th and 7th Congressional Districts after the 2010 census.

³⁶ Lyons, John F. "Cold War and Anti-Communism." Encyclopedia of Chicago. Accessed March 31, 2019. <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/310.html>.

³⁷ Ragin, Charles C. *The Comparative Method: Moving beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies: With a New Introduction*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2014.

The first step in gathering this information was to develop a semi-structured interview protocol to study participants. It was apparent from the outset that many of them were unlikely to know a lot about President Putin and his achievements, largely because Russian domestic politics are not widely covered in the U.S. media. Thus while the interviews are not about him personally and more about his strong leadership style, it made sense to present interviewees with background information on him, his rise to become president of Russia, and his actions in office. This would give each participant a general idea of his accomplishments before the content questions, which asks interviewees to volunteer their admiration/approval of his presidency of Russia on the basis of the information they have received.

In essence, this information comprises 3 paragraphs which explain how Putin started off as an intelligence agent in East Germany and eventually became head of the Kremlin, head of the FSB (Soviet equivalent to the CIA), and finally Prime Minister under Boris Yeltsin.³⁸ It then explains how Putin won the presidency in 2000 and 2004 after Yeltsin had left office, but had to step down in 2008 because the constitution would not allow him a subsequent third consecutive term.³⁸ The background also explains how he helped Dimitri Medvedev win the presidency in 2008 and how Medvedev stood aside when Putin ran in the 2012 election, which Putin won with the new 6 year presidential terms.³⁸ Finally, the background outlines how Putin has helped to rebuild the country into a world power after the collapse of the USSR, in terms of increasing the economy tenfold and raising national pride through acts like annexing Crimea.^{39 40}

³⁸ "Vladimir Putin." Biography.com. January 16, 2019. Accessed March 31, 2019. <https://www.biography.com/people/vladimir-putin-9448807>.

³⁹ "Russia GDP." Russia GDP | 2019 | Data | Chart | Calendar | Forecast | News. Accessed March 31, 2019. <https://tradingeconomics.com/russia/gdp>.

⁴⁰ "Putin Reveals Secrets of Russia's Crimea Takeover Plot." BBC News. March 09, 2015. Accessed March 31, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31796226>.

Along with realizing the subjects would need some background information on Putin, it also made sense to get some background information on them that might help to explain patterns of similarities and differences in their support for President Putin's leadership style that might emerge. So, 5 background questions were asked to assist in the data analysis stage of the project. The 5 questions are simply: 1) "How long have you lived in New Philadelphia?" 2) "What is your gender?" 3) "How do you identify yourself politically?" 4) "What is your highest level of education completed?" 5) "Do you go to church often/frequently?" All 5 of these questions were asked after the interviewees had received the background information on President Putin and before their opinion on his leadership were sought.

In addition to all of the background information, a set of questions were added to measure interviewees' evaluations of President Putin before and after the content questions, which are the main informational questions of the interview. These questions, called range questions, could be answered with a simple number 1-10 and created comparable results to determine if the interviewees' evaluation of President Putin changed as a result of the information in the content questions. These questions were: 1) "On a scale of 1-10, 1 being very cold and 10 being very warm, how do you feel towards President Putin of Russia?" 2) "On a scale of 1-10, 1 being very cold and 10 being very warm, how important do you think it is for a country to have a strong leader in charge?" 3) "On a scale of 1-10, 10 being very important and 1 being not very important, how important is it that elected representatives respond to the wishes of those who elected them?" Additionally, a separate question was added as the last overall question to give a summary view of the first two content questions. The question read, "Do you think that public opinion polls and strength of the economy are adequate measures of the success of a leader?"

With these questions, it became possible to assess whether the increased knowledge of President Putin's record in office resulted in change(s) in evaluations of his leadership style.⁴¹

Finally, comes the actual content questions. These questions were the main focus of the interviews and gave interviewees information about President Putin's actions and/or achievements, and then asked them for their evaluations of them. After some revisions, four content questions were drafted and divided into three sections: 1) The success of President Putin 2) Putin's strong leadership in action and 3) Putin's resolution of the conflict between strong leadership and religious principles and practices. These content questions were designed to ascertain how interviewees evaluated President Putin achievements and/or actions.

The first section had two questions that dealt with President Putin's successes as a leader. Interviewees were informed that Putin has increased Russia's GDP (Gross Domestic Product) tenfold during his time in office and the second question explained how President Putin has consistently enjoyed approval rating of 60% or higher during his presidency.^{39 42 43} The second section dealt with Putin's use of strong leadership by explaining that while he is admired by the people, he has exercised his strong leadership with actions like invading Crimea and extending presidential term lengths, which has damaged their economy and international standing.^{38 40 44} And in the third section, the interviewee is asked to evaluate the conflict between political objectives and religious beliefs by explaining that while Putin is Orthodox Christian, he

⁴¹The expectation was that range scores would not change a lot before and after the content questions due to the short interview period and interviewee's not having enough time for the information to set in.

⁴²"Vladimir Unbound." The Economist. January 30, 2016. Accessed March 31, 2019. <https://www.economist.com/europe/2016/01/30/vladimir-unbound>.

⁴³Armstrong, Martin, and Felix Richter. "Infographic: Putin's Approval Rating Tanks Amid Pension Friction." Statista Infographics. October 22, 2018. Accessed March 31, 2019. <https://www.statista.com/chart/15861/putin-approval-rating/>.

⁴⁴Bloomberg. "Russia Still Paying Price for Crimea Five Years After Annexation." The Moscow Times. April 06, 2019. Accessed April 06, 2019. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/03/17/russia-still-paying-price-for-crimea-five-years-after-annexation-a64833>.

sometimes sacrifices aspects of it to achieve his political goals.⁴⁵ This conflict is presented through two examples: 1) Russia's suppression of the LGBTQ community's right to publicly express their sexuality and 2) Russia banning the sharing of one's religion outside of a recognized religious establishment.^{46 47} In both examples, President Putin went against core principles of the Christian faith, acceptance of the common man and sharing of Christianity respectfully, to instead achieve his political objective of demonstrating strong leadership.

Overall, the questions are designed in a way to get the interviewees' reactions to strong leadership, rather than to Putin himself. This is why the questions are designed so that their focus is on how he used his leadership to restore economic prominence and national pride. The goal of the content questions was to see if people evaluated President Putin on his accomplishments rather than simply rejecting him out of hand for being Russian. If some of the interviewees' would say they were attracted to President Putin's strong leadership, even despite being from an area that has every reason to despise him and is deeply rooted in the conservative belief system, it likely helps to explain Trump's exceptional support in rural America.

⁴⁵ "Vladimir Putin and Religion." ReligionFacts. February 18, 2017. Accessed March 31, 2019. <http://www.religionfacts.com/putin>.

⁴⁶ Rfe/rl. "Russia Violated Basic Rights With LGBT Rally Bans, European Court Rules." RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty. November 27, 2018. Accessed March 31, 2019. <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-violated-basic-rights-with-lgbt-rally-bans-european-court-rules/29623965.html>.

⁴⁷ Luxmoore, Matthew, and Matthew Luxmoore. "Keeping The Faith: With Missionary Work Banned, Mormons In Russia 'Just Making Friends'." RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty. January 04, 2019. Accessed March 31, 2019. <https://www.rferl.org/a/with-missionary-work-banned-mormons-in-russia-just-making-friends-/29683037.html>.

Findings

To gather data for this investigation, a total of 18 people from New Philadelphia were interviewed. These 18 people were chosen to represent the views of New Philadelphia's population in general, not just those of small town Republicans. As a result, these "interviewees" were chosen based on different background characteristics such as: number of years lived in town, gender, education, and partisanship. This created a relatively diverse group of individuals with a broad array of political viewpoints, thus ensuring that any common trends discovered amongst their responses were not just a result of interviewees' partisanship, but reflected their considered evaluations of President Putin's leadership style.

Before examining the interviewees' answers, it is important to explain the characteristics of the group and the different types of responses given to the range and content questions. In total, there was a perfect 9/9 split between the interviewees in terms of gender, with half being male and the other half being female. On average, the interviewees had lived in New Philadelphia for roughly 39 years with the median number of years being 44. Additionally, the group had a relatively balanced spread of political identifications with 5 identifying as Democrat, 6 as Moderate or Independent, and 7 as some form of Republican. Overall, this group of interviewees seems to represent a balanced sampling of New Philadelphia's residents.

As would only be expected from a diverse group, a variety of responses were given to the questions. For some interviewees, they decided to answer the content questions with simple responses. Interviewee 13 directly stated that she did not think that she was a good interviewee due to her lack of knowledge of politics, but did her best to make sense of a content question by drawing parallels to American politics to answer the question. In another instance, interviewee 9

stated that she was very nervous to answer questions about politics because she knew little about it, but did try to elaborate on the fourth content question about religion as that was something with which she identified strongly. It seemed that whenever an interviewee struggled to express their thought, they would connect it to something more familiar to orient themselves.

On the other hand, some interviewees had a lot to say when they were passionate about certain questions. In one instance, interviewee 14 spoke for several minutes on the fourth content question regarding religion as he himself was a Minister at a local church. The interviewee even went as far as to cite the Bible to support his response. During another interview, interviewee 4 spoke for 2-3 minutes when responding to the warmth range question about President Putin at the end of the interview, a question that was normally answered with a simple number. These types of responses did not usually occur, but they were very informative when they did to understand the interviewees' patterns of thinking better.

And in some instances, the interviewee would take issue with the wording of the question and interpret it to suit their pre-existing viewpoint. During one interview, interviewee 18 asserted that 'admire' was not the word he would use but rather be made 'aware' of what President Putin had done or was doing. Interviewee 6 also said almost the exact same thing with 'admire' not being the best word and instead favoring 'aware.' And this was a trend that was even repeated with interviewee 8 as he responded with what he called a 'qualified yes' to the content questions. He thought it was objectively impressive what Putin had done but questioned what Putin had to do to achieve those things and what it cost Russia. Responses such as these brought further interesting viewpoints as these interviewees decided to expound outside the interview's content in an attempt to establish a fuller picture of President Putin.

Overall, there were a lot of qualified responses to the questions: some personal, some interpretive, and some moral, but there were also several patterns that characterized a majority of the responses. These patterns, while not shared by every interviewee, suggested a similarity of viewpoints among a majority of them and give an insight into how small town Americans feel about the leadership style of President Putin. Moreover, three dimensions of similarities could be identified. These are: 1) Interviewees were not overwhelmingly warm towards Putin but still admired him 2) Interviewees admired what he had done but not how he did it and 3) Interviewees doubted that true Christian values generally informed his political decisions and actions.

1. Interviewees were not overwhelmingly warm towards Putin but still admired him

The first range question allowed interviews to volunteer a simple number to indicate how they felt about President Putin after the background information and before and after the content questions. While this number does not convey the complexity and totality of feelings towards President Putin, it is a useful summary measure of base feelings towards him and to see if there was any change in their feelings as a result of the increased knowledge about Putin's achievements.^{48 49}

As can be expected, the overall pattern of responses to the range question indicated that interviewees did not have very warm feelings towards President Putin. Looking at the raw numbers, the average warmth score towards him (with 10 being very warm) was only a 4.06 at the beginning of the interview and a 4.24 after his achievements in office had been spelled out to

⁴⁸ Only 17 of the 18 interviewees' responses were used because interviewee 5 was the only one who gave positive approval for President Putin on all questions and was therefore an outlier. His inclusion would have skewed the data giving a biased view of New Philadelphians as a whole.

⁴⁹ **Interviewee 5 (excluded) information:** Years: 52; Gender: Male; Political ID: Independent; Range Scores: 6,9

them. Of the 17 interviewees, only 6 changed their score when the question was repeated at the end of the interview and of those 6, only 3 gave a higher score. So overall, the majority of interviewees had little to no change in their feelings towards him. Additionally, only 2 of the respondents stated at any time their feelings towards President Putin were at a 7 or higher, meaning that of the 34 total responses only 2 of them were at 7 or higher. There was also no similarities in the characteristics between these two interviewees, which suggests the attraction of strong leadership is distributed somewhat evenly in the population.

So what do these scores mean? Well, by themselves not very much because they are limited in their informational context and do not really taken into account why the participants feel the way they do. It is not until they are put into context with the interviewees' actual responses that the relevance of these numbers are realized because while the numbers are not very high, many of the interviewees still said they admired President Putin.

The source of this reluctant admiration for President Putin can be clearly seen by looking at the results of the first two content questions. Of the 17 interviewees, not a single one claimed not to admire President Putin's successes with the economy and the public opinion polls. 12 of them said flatly they did admire Putin's successes, in regards to these two areas of achievement, and 4 of the other 6 said they 'sort of' admired him. The other two interviewees, 6 and 18, replied that they did not think 'admire' was the best word but rather 'aware' would be a better term. So, in total 15 of the 17 interviewees responded that they admired President Putin at least some level.

This point can further be illustrated by some of the quotes from the interviewees themselves during the interviews. Interviewee 17 stated, "...right now he (Putin) is a hell of a strong leader...." In another interview, interviewee 4 stated, "The guy has ambition. He has

come from nothing, and is basically a dictator in my opinion, but I still have admiration for a guy who went from where he started to where he is now. It shows a lot of ambition and commitment that he has probably sacrificed everything to be where he is today.” And when asked if President Putin’s successes with the economy was admirable, interviewee 14 responded, “Yes, that much of a change to grow things is very admirable.” These are just a few quotes from some of the interviews but work well to illustrate the basis of interviewees’ admiration for President Putin, both for what he has achieved and for him as an individual.

So, while some of the interviewees may not have felt overwhelmingly warm towards President Putin, there does appear to be a level of admiration for him and what he has achieved. Depending on the interviewee, the reasoning for their admiration varied where some admired President Putin as a strong individual and some admired him for his achievements. The intensity of admiration also seems to vary from interviewee to interviewee, with some really admiring President Putin while others seemed to be indifferent. This then becomes further interesting when examining the next pattern, regarding interviewees’ opinions of President Putin’s methods.

2. Interviewees admired what Putin has achieved but not how he did it

As just established, there is certainly widespread admiration, albeit often reluctant, amongst the interviewees for President Putin’s successes, but there is also a common concern about the means by which he has achieved them. While some interviewees agreed with how President Putin did things, the majority did not and some even went as far as to condemn his methods. And this disapproval is evident in the responses because almost all of the interviewees directly stated that they either questioned or did not approve of how President Putin went about achieving his political goals.

Overall, the interviewees who expressed some reservation about how he achieved his successes fell into one of two categories, those who expressed reservations about his methods and those who condemned them outright. On average, those who expressed reservations, the Ambivalents, average a 4.7 (before) and 5.1 (after) on the range questions and those who condemned President Putin, the Critics, average a 3.25 (before) and 3.25 (after) on the range question. For the Ambivalents, their responses tended to stop short of directly condemning his methods in favor of seeking an explanation for why he went about things the way he did. Interviewee 7 responded to the question about his poll numbers by saying, “It depends on what got him to that popularity. How you got there is more important than being there.” While not directly condemning what President Putin did, or may have done, to achieve the high numbers she did express reservations about how he got there. When asked about Putin’s neglect of his religiosity in favor of being a strong leader, interviewee 17 responded, “I understand why he did it but then to say that he is a practicing Christian and then to go against it, I don’t understand that.” And when asked about President Putin’s use of strong leadership, interviewee 1 stated, “It all seems to be for his gain and he doesn’t really seem to care about the backlash.” With all three of these interviewees, there is a clear expression of reservation towards President Putin’s methods, but not a direct condemnation as seen with some of the other responses.

For other interviewees, some chose to directly condemn President Putin’s methods. When asked about Putin repressing the LGBTQ community’s right to give public expression to their sexuality, interviewee 18 stated, “I would refer to the 1st amendment that we all have freedom of speech and obviously he is of a different mindset. He did it for a political reason, for a selfish reason and within Russia the majority crushes the minority.” When asked about President Putin using his strong leadership to annex Crimea, interviewee 2 stated, “I don’t think he should have

used his strong leadership doing that just going and taking land, even if it used to be theirs, taking it back and creating friction was probably not good internationally.” And interviewee 4 stated on the same topic, “I don’t agree with him or with the way he does things. I think it was a crime against humanity with what he did in that country when he went in with military personnel. No I don’t agree with how he does things because he basically violated international law with invading the country.” Thus, this second group went a step further and condemned his methods outright rather than just expressing reservations about how he went about achieving them.

Now it is also important to note that while rare, there were a few expressions of approval for Putin’s action. For example, when asked about President Putin annexing Crimea, interviewee 10 responded by saying that he admired Putin’s methods because, “.... they have a lot invested there (Crimea) and so whatever happened there happened, you got to have whatever you need to have.” But in total, there were only 2 responses from 2 different interviewees that directly endorsed President Putin’s methods. Overall, the vast majority of the interviewees, regardless of their personal characteristics, expressed some form of disapproval of his methods. Some even went on to question the religious justification that he commonly gave for his methods, which leads into the third pattern.

3. Interviewees doubted his claim that Christian values informed his political decisions and actions

This ambivalence is reflected in the more than half of the interviewees who were skeptical about the religious justification President Putin often gave for his actions. The pattern largely appeared in the responses to the 4th content question regarding his use of religion as a political tool, as many interviewees doubted the genuineness of his credentials as a practicing

Christian. Interviewees tended to state that either a) it was not enough for him to just say he was a Christian if he did not act like one and b) he only uses religion as a political tool to achieve his goals rather than being an actual Christian. This pattern is probably the least common of the three but it did appear in some form in 11 of the 17 interviewers.^{50 51}

For some of the interviewees, it was not enough for President Putin to simply assert he was Christian, but to them he needed to actually show that Christian values influenced his actions in office. Interviewee 3 stated that, “Well I think that anyone can say they are, for example Christian, and that they have those beliefs, but unless they are putting them into practice, which he obviously has not really done, he basically isn’t walking the walk. If his beliefs and moral compass were important to him, he wouldn’t have done some of those things.” In his response to the same question, interviewee 11 asserted, “I think that if he is going to claim something he needs to actually live it in all capacities of his life claiming that and then not living like that, especially in the political and world stage, is wrong and makes Christianity look bad.” As can be seen here, there was a majority disapproval of President Putin portraying himself as a Christian without practicing its values, which was shared by virtually all interviewees.

Taking a similarly skeptical position, others questioned the use of his Christianity to explain his actions, theorizing instead that he uses it as a political tool. During her interview, interviewee 7 stated, “I think it shows that he is not genuine if he just puts down his religious view to increase his popularity and leadership.” When the same question was asked of interviewee 8, he responded, “Generally no because he does not have any genuine core beliefs

⁵⁰ The only distinguishing characteristic between the two groups, those who doubted Putin’s genuineness as a true Christian and those who did not, was that the doubters were a majority Republican (6 of 11 or 55%).

⁵¹ **Doubters:** Males: 6, Females: 5; **Republicans:** 6, Democrats: 3, Moderates: 2

Non-doubters: Males: 2, Females: 4; **Republicans:** 2, Democrats: 2, Moderates: 2

and is mostly driven by his own agenda and the religious aspects of his 'character' for the Russian people are only used when it benefits him and when it doesn't he suppresses them."

Interviewee 4 also made the same assertion saying that, "I am a Christian and do not want to cast doubt on others, but I really have doubts about whether or not Putin is a true Christian. I think he plays that role to benefit his position in his country. So he will do whatever it takes to look good but deep down it's all about control." As can be seen here, some interviewees questioned his religiosity inferring that it is more or less a character that he plays to maintain support.

So overall, three major patterns could be identified in the responses of interviewees. These three stand-out dimensions of evaluations of President Putin were: 1) Interviewees were not overwhelmingly warm towards Putin but still admired him 2) Interviewees admired what Putin has achieved but not how he did it and 3) Interviewees doubted his genuineness as a Christian. Most of the interviewees did admire him as an individual and his achievements, but did not approve of how he achieved those things, citing reasons such as: international law, ethics, and false portrayal of religiosity. The majority of interviewees also seriously doubted his genuineness as a Christian, stating that he is not really a Christian and instead deploys his religiosity as cover for his political actions. And interesting enough, there appeared to be no distinguishing similarities in characteristics in each group of responses, which means that their viewpoints on strong leadership are not restricted or exclusive to factors like: gender, partisanship, or age.

Conclusion

Overall, this project was designed to ascertain how small town, rural Americans viewed strong leadership in countries' leaders. The purpose of this was to determine how important it was to rural Americans and to see how it may have played a role in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Overall, after interviewing some small town Americans about the leadership of Russian President Vladimir Putin, widely considered a strong leader, it is clear that there is an admiration amongst rural America for a strong leadership style like his. This is because of how he projects himself to his people and the world, as well as the achievements and successes he has enjoyed. But it was also clear that their admiration was restrained by two important factors: 1) the methods used by President Putin to achieve his success and 2) skepticism about the justifications for his actions, specifically his grounding in Christianity. While almost all of the interviewees expressed some form of admiration for President Putin's success, many also expressed varying levels of reservation towards his methods because of factors like violation(s) of international law and damage to the Russian economy as a result of his actions. A majority of interviewees were also skeptical of his religious justifications for some of his actions, stating that he did not practice Christian beliefs and may just use it as a political tool to help maintain his power. So, while rural Americans admired the successes President Putin's strong leadership could bring, they also disapproved of his methods and justifications to achieve those successes.

These findings on strong leadership likely also help to explain, at least in part, the outcome of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, as well as what may happen in the 2020 election. The evidence suggests that Trump's promise of strong, purpose-oriented leadership played a role in his extraordinary electoral success in 2016 because of rural America's common admiration for

such this style of leadership. By promising to deviate from America's traditional, brokerage-style of presidential leadership to make America great again, Trump was able to resonate well with the people there and secure 62% of rural America's vote (65% in Tuscarawas County) to help him win the presidency.¹¹ But, the evidence also suggests that his current methods may lead to a decline in his popularity in the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Almost all of the interviewees admired President Putin's success but disapproved of his methods because of the controversy they caused, and similarly President Trump's methods as president have also drawn controversy because of actions like: his use of executive orders to declare a national emergency, break-up of immigrant families at the Mexican border, and frequent battles in the courts over actions many deem unconstitutional. So, if President Trump continues to draw controversy with his actions, the evidence from this paper suggests that his popularity may decline in 2020. The question will be though: Are rural Americans willing to forgive him because he is not the president of Russia? Perhaps, for example, they care more about "Making America Great Again" than about how this renaissance is achieved.

Participant Index:

Ambivalents:

| Participant # | Years lived in NP | Gender | Political Identification | Range Score |
|----------------------|--------------------------|---------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|
| 1 | 43 | Female | Democrat | 2,2 |
| 6 | 48 | Male | Moderate | 4,4 |
| 7 | 25 | Female | Democrat | 6,5 |
| 9 | 12 | Female | Republican | 5,5 |
| 10 | 60 | Male | Democrat* | 6,7 |
| 12 | 45 | Female | Republican | 5,8 |
| 14 | 9 | Male | Republican | 5,5 |
| 16 | 39 | Female | Moderate | 5,5 |
| 17 | 69 | Male | Republican | 5,5 |

*Identifies that way but does not always vote that way

Average range score: 4.7, 5.1

Critics:

| Participant # | Years lived in NP | Gender | Political Identification | Range Score |
|----------------------|--------------------------|---------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|
| 2 | 23 | Female | Moderate | 2,2 |
| 3 | 56 | Female | Democrat* | 4,4 |
| 4 | 53 | Male | Republican | 4,4 |
| 8 | 45 | Male | Moderate Republican | 2,2 |
| 11 | 5 | Male | Moderate Conservative | 5,4 |
| 13 | 53 | Female | Democrat | 2,4 |
| 15 | 22 | Female | Moderate/Republican | 3,3 |
| 18 | 41 | Male | Moderate | 4,3 |

Average Range score: 3.25, 3.25

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48. Only 17 of the 18 interviewees' responses were used because interviewee 5 was the only one who gave positive approval for President Putin on all questions and was therefore an outlier. His inclusion would have skewed the data giving a biased view of New Philadelphians as a whole.

49. **Interviewee 5 (excluded) information:** Years: 52; Gender: Male; Political ID: Independent; Range Scores: 6, 9

50. The only distinguishing characteristic between the two groups, those who doubted Putin's genuineness as a true Christian and those who did not, was that the doubters were a majority Republican (6 of 11 or 55%).

51. **Doubters**: Males: 6, Females: 5; ***Republicans***: 6, Democrats: 3, Moderates: 2
Non-doubters: Males: 2, Females: 4; Republicans: 2, Democrats: 2, Moderates: 2